



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as The Alexandria Times and Advertiser

Out of the Attic

Alexandria's Evolution as Seen by an Illustrator

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Image: "Bird's Eye View of Alexandria, Va.", Charles Magnus 1863. Library of Congress.

Alexandria has historically been a diverse city of immigrants, settled originally by founding families from the British Isles and quickly joined by African-Americans who labored as both slaves and freemen to not only build the new town in the mid-18th century, but to service its global economy focused on trans-Atlantic trade.

But just a century later, a new set of immigrants arrived in America from Europe associated with political exile after unrest on the continent, and this impacted Alexandria in both direct and indirect ways. After the German Revolution of 1848 was put down by the ruling conservative aristocracy, those citizens supporting more liberal forms of political expression were often arrested or persecuted, forcing their departure from their home country for a new life in the United States.

In Alexandria, an influx of middle-class German shop keepers in the 1850s replaced many of the traditional King Street artisanal workshops and showrooms — which originally crafted silver and pottery — with dry goods, breweries and hardware. Rather than passing through Alexandria temporarily, many of these new families chose to stay in the city, set down roots, build cultural and religious institutions and assimilate themselves into their adopted hometown.

Among those "Forty-Eighters" who did not actually reside in Alexandria but influenced its development and heritage was Adolf Cluss, a former associate of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who was selected as the architect of the 1871 City Hall building. Another was the mapmaker and lithographer Julian Carl Magnus, best known under the pseudonym Charles Magnus for his "Bird's Eye Views" of America's great cities, including Alexandria. Magnus was born in Elberfeldt, Germany in 1826, and at the age of 22 fled Germany with his family for New York, due to his opposition to the policies of Emperor Frederick William IV.

Once in that city, he and his brother established a German-language newspaper, but he soon turned his printing skills to map-making, establishing a studio on Frankfort Street. His success in that craft led him to create detailed downtown views of major or emerging American urban areas, often based directly on maps. His skill as a lithographer, printing from carefully engraved steel, copper and stone plates rivaled those of the larger Currier and Ives firm. But while Currier and Ives were noted for their





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

artistic beauty, Magnus accurately captured the visual imagery of city scenes. His prints were well respected for their superior print quality.

During the Civil War, the pro-Union Magnus began to print patriotic covers of battle and war scenes that became very popular with the public. At a time when photography was still in its infancy, these engravings, often hand-colored by Magnus himself, depicted the honor and righteousness of the Union cause and promoted his personal world view of liberty and freedom for all.

Interestingly, his 1863 "Bird's Eye View of Alexandria, Va.," seen here, has endured as perhaps the most iconic image of the city, even selected for the backdrop mural behind the horseshoe in council chambers. Over the next several weeks this column will explore different sections of the illustration to further understand Magnus's obsession with detail and how he expressed his political influence in his work.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.